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National News Council holds annual meeting

By Lenora Williamson

The National News Council, in its annual meeting in New York City January 31 reached decisions in four of five complaint cases and formulated position statements on Freedom of the Press issues, including the CIA's use of foreign journalists and proposed televised sessions of the House of Representatives.

The FOP committee session occupied the afternoon, with one statement urging that transmission on television of Congressional proceedings for news purposes be "unfettered—free of the taint of any form of government control."

The statement on the CIA favors the agency extending its ban on the use of media people to foreign journalists and an end to its practice of "planting false stories in publications abroad."

A 51% increase in public support of the Council from 1976 to 1977, with the dollar increase \$221,000 to \$333,000, was announced by William H. Brady, Jr., chairman of the W. H. Brady Co., Milwaukee, in a financial report. Total expenses in 1977 were \$267,000, an increase of \$7,000 over 1976.

In an effort to extend public support of the Council, Brady said he is preparing a recommendation for additional membership through some such group as a "Friends of the News Council." William B. Arthur, executive director, told E&P in reference to 1976 expenditures and receipt figures that there was no deficit then or in any year so far—the 1976 difference being covered in the way grants arrived in the mail.

Dates approved for council sessions in 1978 will be: April 24-25, June 26-27, September 11-12 and November 13-14, all in New York as of now.

Council chairman Norman E. Isaacs, editor in residence at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, presided for the morning session devoted to disposal of the complaint cases.

Action in order of consideration by the Council follows:

Central States Southeast and Southwest Areas Health and Welfare Pension Funds (Teamsters Union) against Time Magazine, Complaint No. 68-77, complaining that Time "violated all standards of responsible reporting," displayed the "anti-labor prejudice of Time" and specifically contained eight identifiable errors of fact in an article focused on the Fund's 1976 annual report to the U.S. Department of Labor. The article contended the pension fund had been mismanaged, that it had a 'lopsi

were in default or uncollectable.

The Council found the complaint warranted on several points the conclusion noting in part: "Time's article was bitingly critical of the Teamsters' Pension Fund . . . The article was clearly defensible as one publication's evaluation of a publicly reported fund operation." But the Council found Time's research faulty and in error on several points. Council members present all concurred.

Sheaffer against NBC-TV (owned and operated stations division) and Landsburg Productions, Inc., Complaint 44-77, in which Robert Sheaffer of Silver Spring, Md., complained that "In Search of the Bermuda Triangle," a syndicated program shown on several NBC-TV stations was characterized by "gross bias and distortion."

The Council's conclusion, by unanimous vote of members present, stated in part that since programs such as this one employ the same techniques as news or public affairs documentaries—interviews, location filming, actual rather than fictional people—the Council will apply the same standards of accuracy to them that it applies to broadcast news and public affairs programs. In that context the Council found the complainant's warranted that three inaccurate statements were made on the program.

Barrett (Lehigh Valley Committee Against Health Fraud, Inc.) against the New York Times, Complaint No. 91-77, in which Dr. Stephen J. Barrett, chairman of the committee complained that a *New York Times Magazine* article was inaccurate and biased as it related to Dr. J. Anthony Morris, a research scientist in the Food and Drug Administration.

The Council conclusion, concurred by the members present stated in part that the Council does not believe that the complainant offered any support for contention that the article by Helen Dudar was deliberately biased. But in the matter of the article's failure to refer to significant and material facts, the Council finds its earlier decision controlling here and finds the complaint warranted.

Taylor against WBBM-TV (Chicago) News, Complaint No. 85-77 in which Dr. Samuel G. Taylor of the Northwestern University Medical School, who opposes use of the controversial drug Laetrile, complained about the station's news reports on the subject of the drug.

The Council's conclusions in part that aside from injudicious use of the word "breakthrough" in its promotional "newsbreak" and in its introduction to

tions and networks should exercise extreme caution to avoid distorting the content of a story with a sensational news-break tease. However, in all other respects, the Council finds that WBBM-TV, in its reports on Laetrile, acted in the public interest and that the complaints are unwarranted." Vote was unanimous with Richard Salant of CBS abstaining because of conflict of interest.

Dole and Koenigsberg against New York Magazine, Complaint No. 97-77 in which Professor Vincent P. Dole of the Rockefeller University and Lee Koenigsberg, director of the Methadone Information Center, New York City, complained that a *New York* magazine article about methadone treatment was "grossly slanted," "irresponsible" and "startlingly inaccurate."

After considerable discussion about the reporter's techniques (Blake Fleetwood) and "robust journalism" the Council vote ended in a tie decision 4-4 with 2 abstaining.

Council members present for the voting in addition to Isaacs and Brady included: Joan Ganz Cooney, president of the Children's Television Workshop; Loren F. Ghiglione, editor and publisher of the *Southbridge* (Mass.) *Evening News*; James M. Lawson, Jr. pastor of Holman United Methodist Church, Los Angeles; Michael E. Pulitzer, editor and publisher of the *Arizona Daily Star*, Tucson and associate editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; Ralph Renick, vice-president and news director of WTVJ, Miami; Sylvia Roberts, Baton Rouge, La., attorney; William A. Rusher, publisher of the *National Review*, and Richard S. Salant, president of CBS News.

The Council adopted rules of procedure changes aimed at "streamlining and deformatizing" the operation, including dropping the request that any person or organization complained against has to reply within 20 days, and also the forwarding of that response to a complainant. The memo noted: "We seem to get more cooperation by being relaxed and informal than by giving news organizations ultimatums and deadlines."

Also the procedure in referral of complaints to a committee now has been consolidated into three rules:

"The complaint and other materials gathered during the factual inquiry shall be forwarded by staff to the appropriate committee for consideration. The parties shall be informed of the time and place of the committee consideration.

"If a committee decides that a public hearing would be useful to the proper consideration of a case, it shall so inform the parties and notify them of the time and place of the hearing.

"All parties may present evidence at a hearing, either in person or through a representative."